The task of writing a critique of current Christian Studies programs is a challenging yet somewhat daunting one. In our pre-existent period, before the introduction of the *Life* curriculum, diversity rather than uniformity was the nature of things. In the secondary school setting, this phasing in stage is still in its infancy and so much of the present diversity remains. It became incumbent upon me, to somehow seek to coordinate the various approaches, topics and materials being used, in order to facilitate some debate and discussion in this area. What I realized in the process was that any critique would be based upon my own presuppositions, in relation to curriculum design and the learning situation. If anyone is in a position to critique the current situation of Christian Studies in the local Lutheran School environment, the mantle of assessment must fall upon the teachers of that faculty. Perhaps my opinions, as expressed in this paper may challenge your thinking and assist you in the further development of this learning area.

My main focus relates to the Christian Studies curriculum in the secondary school as this is where my experience lies. However, I believe that many issues relating to the curriculum can be extrapolated across year levels. Most teachers, regardless of their faculty, have concerns about issues relating to their learning area. Some items that are pertinent for me are those of tokenism, where Christian Studies is given little time and recognition in the school curriculum; a lack of balance between the affective and cognitive domains in curriculum design; the question of relevance in topics; the lack of interest in accredited subjects; school election of Christian Studies teachers; support for the Head of the Department; and the creation of a framework based upon a sound learning model.

**Methodology:**

A survey was sent out to a selection of twelve colleges which were representative of the Lutheran School system. The survey consisted of six questions covering the areas of lesson time, content, curriculum design, program assessment, role of Christian Studies in the school, and the new *Life* curriculum. (Appendix A) Of the twelve schools chosen for this task there were ten respondents. These schools were from South Australia, Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales.
Question 1: Number of lessons per week

Time allowances varied depending on the particular school. On average, there was an even distribution of time across the Junior and Senior School. Lesson times ranged from 75 minutes per week to 150 minutes per week.

Average time/week in Junior School: 110mins

Average time/week in Senior School: 112mins

In Lutheran Schools, Christian Studies needs to be seen as a core subject and as such should have an appropriate allocation of time. Anything under 80 minutes per week (less than two lessons), across all year levels, is nothing less than tokenism. One should compare time allocation for this learning area with other core subjects. About 150 minutes a week is needed for the teaching of an in-depth curriculum.

Time consideration also needs to be addressed in the area of administration within the faculty. Traditionally, this is one of the largest faculties in the school and demands a lot of planning and development time. There are more part time, non specialist teachers in Christian Studies, than any other subject area in the school. Some survey comments on this problem:

Two new teachers to CL means we are planning as we go; lack of time allowances have made this very difficult; currently uncoordinated; cobbled something together.
Question 2: Curriculum Content

Question 6: Life

Virtually all schools intend to implement *Life* or some units of it, into the Junior School. Many schools have already made use of units in their current curriculum. We are integrating the better aspects of *Life* with what we have at the moment. Where possible we are adopting the *Life* model units format and using the ideas and resources provided by the *Life* curriculum.

This curriculum will have a dramatic impact on what happens in Lutheran Schools as far as Christian Studies are concerned. The advantage of *Life* is its strong Lutheran confessional base, a good framework with plenty of suggestions and resources to assemble your own curriculum package. *Life* allows for diversity in approach and enables teachers to be creative in their lesson design.

It is important that before any transition takes place, the Head of Department carefully maps out how the curriculum will fit together in the Junior School. A spiral curriculum faces the danger of repetition and the non-engagement of students. Methodologies, topic selection, level of work chosen and activities all need thoughtful selection. Adopting *Life* should mean a continuation of the ‘hard life’, in the sense that we continue to work hard in developing what exists in the document. We should not see the package as a *fait accompli* from the point of view of lesson planning. As I see it, *Life* is not a prescriptive document that precludes the need for further development but rather encourages diversity, creativity and experimentation. In essence, as far as our role is concerned in the development of curriculum, there is life after *Life*.

In relation to the Senior curriculum, six out of the eleven schools had an accredited subject at either Year 11 and or both Year 11 and Year 12. Positive feedback centred on good content and framework, assisting the understanding of multiculturalism, professional approach to learning, work-shopping with other teachers, and recognition for student effort. In relation to negative comments: one school found that the topics did not relate well to some of the country students, the curriculum presupposes a universalistic approach to teaching the subject and it is seen as an extra unit for students to complete with assessment demands.

It is evident that we as Lutheran educators have to become proactive in various accredited bodies and in the production of syllabi for the Senior School. If we believe in our approach to teaching Christian Studies, we have to make an effort to become involved at that point where the decisions are made.

**Question 3: Curriculum Design**

This question brought some interesting responses largely from people who inherited the key to the faculty storeroom by default. Responses displayed a sense of frustration with not having the necessary skills or time to develop a well-planned curriculum.

whatever I can find; uncoordinated; planning as we go; thrown in at the deep end.
On the other hand, there were responses which reflected an in-depth knowledge of curriculum trends and developments:

- balance between affective and the cognitive domain; a cognitive approach does not necessarily preclude faith development; a constructionist approach based on the Habermas model.

We certainly affirm what many are doing in promoting good planning and need to work out ways to assist those who are struggling to cope with the demands placed upon them. The following comment was made in the Christian Education News, July, 1999.

My vision for the Christian Studies Key Teacher is that they become a specialist; a specialist in the area of Religious Education. The Key Teachers are familiar with the developments in theory and practice of religious education…

We have to encourage the development of teachers with the desire and skill to teach in the Christian Studies faculty. We should be looking to graduate teachers who have their primary method as religious education. Unfortunately, a piecemeal approach whereby we fill up teaching loads has had in many ways a negative outcome in the faculty. While it may be good to involve ‘the many’, in some cases this has meant people who do not have the skills or interest in this subject area and so we have created a less than desirable classroom setting.

Question 4: Positive and Negatives of Current Curriculum

This section acts as a reminder that there are many good things that are happening across schools but also problems that have to be addressed. Some of the negatives related to:

- selection of teachers who have a poor knowledge of the area; a lack of planning time; little negotiated curriculum; poor engagement of students; presenting the senior curriculum in ‘neutral’ manner and not in keeping with the aims of the school; failure to meet students at their level; a senior curriculum not accessible to all students; Year 11 and 12 require more time to sharpen theological skills; piecemeal as units don’t form a logical whole.

On the positive side respondents to the survey commented:

- strong cognitive base with serious movement towards personal spirituality; accommodates a wide range of learning styles; encourages spiritual and ethical development; plenty of variety; it links in well with the worship program; developed by teachers with a strong passion for the course; engages student interest in the main; educationally sound and good resources.

Possessing a worthwhile curriculum and well-accredited teachers makes for a good beginning but you still need teachers who are able to help children grow in their relationship with God. (cf. Kuck 1998: 72f), R. Eisenmenger would reminds us of our role as agents of mission and that we are not just another educational institution but one through which the Holy Spirit may work in the lives of the people who make up our various communities. (Eisenmenger 1998: 73f)
Question 5: The Role of Christian Studies

Most responses referred to Christian Studies as a ‘key learning area in the school’ and reinforcing the central focus of the community. Mention was made that there was a ‘positive staff involvement’ towards the subject but also a belief that the Heads of Department should be given a choice of teachers. Time-wise there was the feeling that lessons were being ‘encroached upon’ by other school demands.

A general feeling existed that there has to be a better promotion of the subject not only within the school but amongst the entire community. Of course, one of the best ways of lifting the profile of this learning area is from within. Providing courses which are relevant and engaging, as well as teachers who are skilled, will assist in meeting the desired outcome. These teachers would also need to be good role models for their students and value their worth. Stress should be placed upon the BLS guidelines for staffing this faculty area. Dr P Vardy makes the statement that teachers in order to relate to students growing up in a post modern society will have to change their methodologies accordingly.

…new and imaginative teaching styles may have to be introduced and consideration will have to be given to which teachers are sufficiently committed to Religious Education as a subject and are sufficiently dynamic to be able to undertake this task. (Vardy 1997: 7)

In relation to the standing of Christian Studies in the school, it was also felt that ‘there is no strong professional association that promotes the advancement of this subject.’ This statement is not to deny the good work already being done by other persons or groups in Lutheran circles. I refer to the statements that exist in the Life curriculum and the collective wisdom of those associated with the Emmaus Package. Perhaps we should become more active in such groups as AARE (The Australian Association for Religious Education).

Some Current Issues in Curriculum:

Language

The 1994 National Social Science Survey pointed out that only 25% of the total adult population in Australia went to church once a month or more often. The meaning of this statistic impacts on the younger generation, as it reminds us that they are not growing up in the traditional church culture. With this background in mind, teachers are challenged to help students ‘to articulate their own questions and explore the richness of the religious traditions’ (Malone 1998: 8) New ways have to be found to approach traditional truths. We cannot presuppose that our students are cogniscent of traditional religious terminology and story. Much spadework in creating a firm foundation for future developments in learning will be required.

Chris Wheat in commenting on the use of familiar language maintains that if we want to relate to young people today, we would need to talk about God as ‘rad’ or ‘wicked’. These terms are known to young people and have significance for them. (Burnham 1994: 24) Burnham suggests that the use of relevant metaphors can also help us in engaging our students. He quotes the examples of speaking about God as Mother, Lover and Friend. (Burnham 1994: 27)
Dr Malcolm Bartsch in his dissertation on the relationship between theology and education reminds us that although theological truths may remain constant, they need to be formulated in such a manner so as ‘to communicate into the present educational scenario’. (Bartsch 1999: 2) In this postmodern age, as teachers we are challenged to rethink traditional symbol. Dr Bartsch refers to Braaten’s statement on this issue: the content of theology needs to be brought into the current ‘context of life’ otherwise the heritage of past teachings will have the problem of transference into today’s society. (Bartsch 1999: 4)

**Affective Education**

Discussions relating to curriculum development often focus on the relationship between the cognitive and affective domains. Schrub stresses that there is nothing automatic about affective education and that it demands careful planning. (Schrub 1997: 134f)

> In planning curriculum we can be sure in most cases that the cognitive aspect will be covered. However, it is often easy to forget the ‘celebratory and experiential’. (Butler 1998: 98)

That learning is more than knowledge is recognized in the dictum of West who said that ‘the heart of education is the education of the heart. (O’Kelly 1999: 14) The two most precious gifts we possess as teachers are those of our students and the gospel message. Our calling is ‘that it is our dignity and challenge to bring both together’. (O’Kelly 1999: 14)

In affective education, our students need to reflect upon the truth as they see it, using the scriptures as a mirror. Even when differences arise that situation too can be a positive beginning. Schrub comments on dissonance as a learning tool:

> Cognitive dissonance can provide us with an important affective tool, leading to either a reordering of values and priorities when old ones are weighed and found wanting or a reaffirmation when old ones are vindicated… Cognitive dissonance has great potential to help us teach the Law-Gospel relationship and other paradoxes. (Schrub 1997: 140)

The affective domain can be catered for within the classroom by allowing students the time for thoughtful reflection. External activities, though useful, are not the only way of covering this domain. In the post-modern age, where students are more open to the experiential in their journey for meaning, the affective domain will play an important role.

**The Five Strands Approach**

Some Independent Schools including Lutheran Schools have been contemplating the Five Strands Approach put forward by Dr Peter Vardy. Dr Vardy proposes an interdisciplinary approach which includes a framework to enable students to think through the issues relating to religious education. His five areas include the Philosophy of Religion, Ethics, Religions of the World, Sacred Texts and Spirituality.
Whether or not you agree with his educational philosophy, you will find his views challenging and worthy of consideration.

Rev Dr R Noone of the Melbourne Grammar School says of Dr Vardy’s approach: …places religious education squarely in the academic mainstream. Its emphasis on open-minded inquiry may just save the discipline. Certainly, the attempt is worth it. The possibilities of rejuvenation of religious education are very real. (Noone 1999: 26)

Dr P Vardy suggests that Australian schools have to take a serious look at themselves and their religious and values education methods. The challenge as he sees it is ‘to produce a vision which is distinctively Australian but which nevertheless engages children.’(Vardy 1997: 2)

**Christian Theology Accredited Course**

In South Australia, a new Year 12 PAS (Publicly Assessed Subject) course entitled *Christian Theology* is in the process of being written. It can be taught as a one or two unit subject and is expected to be accredited and ready for use in 2001. Unlike the previous course that used a Social Studies framework, the new course has a Christian theological base. It is intentionally Christian in its orientation. Scripture, dogma and creeds will have a focus in the new course as they all have a role to play in what it means to be a Christian. (Braaten 1998: 5) The course is not based in one particular Christian tradition, but by examining Foundational Concepts, Scripture, Christology and Ecclesiology there is scope to study both commonalities and differences between various Christian Churches.

Topics will include the areas of Biblical Studies, Theology, Christology as well as Contemporary Issues. Students will also select an area of general interest for their Depth Study. Student topics are to be negotiated with staff.

It is also envisaged that the subject will contain a *Pathways* approach, meaning that students, who complete the course successfully, will be granted accreditation towards subjects in tertiary institutions. In the Lutheran setting, this course may serve to promote closer links between the colleges and Luther Seminary.

**Summary**

It is fair to say that there is more interest in Lutheran Schools at the present time than the previous decade. The Lutheran Church of Australia has played a significant role through its various agencies and people to bring about this outcome. Our calling as educators involved in mission, should motivate us to make use of our God-given talents in the development of Christian Studies programs, so that our students may come to meet with Christ. For what has happened in the past and is in the present, to God be the glory. A God who will also bless our efforts in the future.

*Pastor Rob Sellars*
*September 1999*
Appendix A

Survey Outline/Questions

1. Number of lessons per week at: Year 8: (Lesson time in minutes)
   Year 9:
   Year 10:
   Year 11:
   Year 12:

2. Description of curriculum content at each year level. State if course is accredited at senior level.
   Year 8:
   Year 9:
   Year 10:
   Year 11:
   Year 12:

3. How would you describe your approach to curriculum design?

4. What are the positive and negative features of your current curriculum in Christian Studies?

5. Does Christian Studies play a significant role in your school? To what extent?

6. How is the Life curriculum being used in your school?
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